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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUMPREL](#) [RS](#) [GG](#) [AJ](#)  
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: ELECTION UPATE, OCTOBER 10-14

REF: A. BAKU 454  
[1](#)B. BAKU 353

Classified By: POLITICAL-ECONOMIC COUNSELOR ROB GARVERICK, for reasons  
1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Election Monitoring Center (EMC) and the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety released pre-election, interim reports October 10 and 11, respectively, noting certain improvements in the election process, while raising concerns about the slow handling of complaints by the CEC, misuse of administrative resources, television bias for President Aliyev, and, more broadly, a general lack of political discourse in the campaign. Azerbaijan's CEC Chairman, in an October 13 meeting with Embassy officials, sought to clarify these points. Local commentators, meanwhile, separately suggested the likelihood of fraud to bolster voter turnout and, in a broader sense, outlined poor prospects for the opposition. The EMC and the Norwegian Embassy observer missions experienced problems in registering election observers, though some issues were addressed. Traditional opposition parties held a rally October 11 to encourage a boycott of the election, but the appeal lacked cohesion. The Open Society Party, which is not fielding a presidential candidate, decided last week it would endorse Aliyev for reelection, to the chagrin of other oppositionists. END SUMMARY

#### EMC ISSUES REPORT AND NOTES REGISTRATION PROBLEMS

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[1](#)2. (SBU) The Election Monitoring Center (EMC), the independent monitoring group which was granted registration by the GOAJ in February and subsequently deregistered (see REF A), on October 10 released its second interim report on findings during this second stage of its long-term observation mission. EMC noted a significant improvement in the level of activity of Constituency and Precinct Election Commissions but remains concerned with the Central Election Commission's (CEC) slow investigation of complaints, noting such complaints are not being heard by the official experts group which was created by amendments to the election code. The report identifies several problems with voter lists in specific constituencies and records a list of twelve instances of government officials pressuring citizens to vote for President Aliyev.

[1](#)3. (C) Experts from the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) agreed with this assessment of the CEC's

mishandling of election complaints, and have been working with the CEC over the past week to correct this problem. According to an IFES expert, the Election Code states that the "Mass Media Council," which has handled campaign complaints so far, is meant to deal only with complaints about access to media, not larger campaign-related complaints. Campaign complaints are meant to be handled by an "expert group" created for this purpose. Embassy officials raised these concerns October 13 with CEC Chairman Mazahir Panahov, who continued to insist that campaign complaints should be handled initially by the "Mass Media Council" rather than the expert group. Panahov agreed, however, that Election Day complaints by voters would be addressed by the experts group.

14. (SBU) While the report notes no problems with registration of observers overall, the EMC reported to the Embassy late on October 10 that the body was now experiencing problems registering observers in two constituencies. Embassy officials worked with the CEC to remedy the problem in one constituency, but the Constituency Election Commission in Zagatala still refuses to register 8 EMC observers, claiming their documentation was late. While this is only one Constituency, EMC reports that the lack of registered observers in these areas will affect the outcome of the Parallel Vote Tabulation.

15. (C) Norwegian Embassy in Baku's First Secretary Richard Scarborough has reported to Embassy officials that the Norwegian Embassy was unable to register 10 Norwegian citizens that were supposed to help the Norwegian Embassy monitor the election. According to Scarborough, the CEC first claimed that they did not receive the proper documentation, and when presented with the proper documentation then claimed that the documentation was falsified, as some of the applicants were not full time employees of the Embassy. The list of denied applicants includes two members of Norway's Helsinki Commission, who were also denied accreditation in 2005. This information contradicts what CEC Chairman Panahov told Embassy officials on October 13, which was that all international observers who applied for accreditation were given it.

#### COMMENTATORS OFFER DOWNCAST DEPICTION OF POLITICS

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16. (SBU) Embassy officers attended a panel discussion of local political experts on October 10 which featured commentators Ilgar Mammedov, Leyla Aliyeva, and Erkin Gadirli. The panelists each expected mass falsification to bolster what is thought would be the lowest voter turnout since independence. While Ilgar Mammedov said local authorities would compel people in their areas to vote, he agreed with Leyla Aliyeva that fraud is being centrally-directed. He also identified the public opinion polls showing not only high support for Aliyev but also high probable voter turnout as efforts to prepare public reaction for the falsified numbers after the polls close on Wednesday. Following Erkin Gadirli's comments on the lack of party politics in Azerbaijan, Aliyeva said she did not think the opposition's problem was the over-personalization of the parties or lack of change in their ranks, but rather the fundamental lack of space for pluralism built into the system. Both Mammedov, who argued the opposition parties were totally discredited and finished in politics, and Gadirli said they see very little hope of change coming from within the system.

17. (U) Later that day, Mammedov commented at panel sponsored by the International Center for Journalists that the limited public space available for criticism of the President or the government in opposition papers and on the internet should not be seen as an achievement, as some in government suggest, but rather as a sign that independent voices have lost ground in the past five years. Other panelists included Member of Parliament Aydin Mirzazade, the Norwegian Ambassador, and representatives of advocacy groups and the media. A journalist from Zerkalo described the decline in the

availability of advertising income for opposition and independent print outlets in the last five years as a major problem for establishing a pluralist press, noting that the pro-government Trend news agency can pay its journalists five times what opposition Turan news agency can.

#### MEDIA MONITORING REPORTS

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¶8. (U) Media monitoring reports released over the weekend by the Institute for Reporters, Freedom and Safety (IRFS) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) were critical of the election coverage by most Azerbaijani media outlets. IRFS noted a lack of vibrant political discourse on television and a general absence of critical mass media underscoring the inability of Aliyev's opponents to pose questions to him directly. While print media offered a greater diversity of views, the coverage on state-controlled TV and most private channels demonstrated bias in favor of Aliyev. Public TV did reduce its reporting on the incumbent's activities and allocated some news coverage to other candidates and ANS provided the most diversity in its coverage of the candidates. RSF also noted a lack of political debate and reported that the media outlets it monitored from September 21 to 26 covered mostly the activities of the first family, emphasized government reforms, and ignored controversial social topics and the government refusal of an opposition rally in Baku.

#### BOYCOTTING OPPOSITION PARTIES HOLD MEETING

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¶9. (U) On October 11 the five opposition parties which are boycotting the election held a meeting in Baku to discuss their views. About 170 people attended the meeting, forcing the organizers to move the meeting from a conference room to the courtyard outside Musavat Party Headquarters. The leaders of the five parties denounced President Aliyev and encouraged voters to boycott the election. An Embassy official who attended the meeting witnessed no police or security services present, and the meeting was conducted peacefully. Leaders of the five opposition parties, however, were not yet able to agree on a path forward.

#### OPPOSITION PARTY REPORTEDLY BACKS ALIYEV

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¶10. (U) Exiled Opposition leader Rasul Guliyev's Open Society Party (OSP), which is not fielding a candidate in the election, announced last week it would endorse President Ilham Aliyev's re-election bid. Local press quoted acting party Chairman Akif Sahbazov as saying the party would remain in opposition but supported stability as well as Aliyev's foreign policy and policy on Nagorno-Karabakh.

¶11. (U) Various other parties have reacted to OSP's decision in different ways. Opposition People's Front Party, also not participating in the election, expressed regret and said OSP had no right to speak on behalf of the opposition.<sup>8</sup> A spokesman for Musavat, another party not fielding a candidate, attributed the decision to pro-government forces within the party's structures, arguing Guliyev does not support the authorities. The official also predicted these members will not override Guliyev's position.

#### COMMENT

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¶12. (C) The fact that EMC has been able to gain accreditation for over 1500 observers despite de-registration as an NGO last spring is a positive sign. Some last minute concerns about the organization's role on election day have been voiced, but overall the GOAJ seems to be listening to concerns and complaints from the international community and working to address them. The continued existence of problems in some regions, however, indicates that local officials may not understand the need to work with observers. In another worrying sign for future cooperation, the CEC Chairman refused to look at the most recent EMC report when an Embassy

official referred to it, stating that EMC does not have legal standing in Azerbaijan. Additionally, the refusal of the CEC to register observers from Norway is a troubling sign that the GOAJ is inconsistent in accreditation practices.

¶13. (C) On the domestic political front, it remains unclear whether the OSP decision to endorse President Aliyev's campaign comes from party officials in Azerbaijan or from Guliyev himself. The endorsement is an abrupt change from the party's previous position but may not be entirely surprising considering the state of and prospects for opposition parties in Azerbaijan or Guliyev's life in exile. The OSP, a small party even among Azerbaijan's small opposition parties, is the result of a 2006 break in Guliyev's Azerbaijan Democratic Party, now led by Guliyev's former deputy Sardar Jalaloglu. It is possible party officials in Azerbaijan are seeking to reach an understanding with the government. It is also possible Guliyev himself recognizes the dim prospects for any return to the political scene and is seeking instead permission to return to Azerbaijan, even temporarily, in a way that the government does not perceive as threatening (see REF B).  
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